

Political Organization and the Changing Role of Leadership: A Study of the Athapahariya Community

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I. Introduction

Whether it is a 'state' or 'stateless' society (Fortes and Evans Pritchard 1940) or a "minimal" or "diffused government", (Mair 1965), there exists some form of political organization in every society. This organization carries out the functions of social control. Radcliffe Brown (1940) does not find it necessary to differentiate between the social and political control and identifies politics as the function of society. But who controls whom, who is a leader, who are his followers, and how a leader assumes a position of control over others are crucial in the understanding of any political system. In the study of a political system of a group or society, the first thing that singles itself out is "authority" or "leadership."

Ethnographic evidence in many simple or peasant societies suggests some important bases for leadership: wealth, the position of a person in a ranked system of society with an extensive kinship network, and contacts with a bureaucracy (See Mayer 1967). In many African societies, such as the Bantu, Yoruba, Zulu, Bemba, Tallensi and Nuer—which range from highly organized to a purely kinship-based system—there are leaders or chiefs who belong to a particular segmentary lineage or minimal lineage with access to resources (land, cattle). Members of the respective groups accept their authority to make communal decisions (Fortes and Evans Pritchard 1940). Discussing the two contrasted types of leadership (characterized as "big man" and "chief") in Melanesia and Polynesia, Sahlins (1958) shows that the authority of Melanesian "big man" rests on personal power based on loyal following whereas the Polynesian "chief" is installed in an inherently powerful office by his position in a ranked system of lineages. Barth (1959) shows that the leadership role in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan is assumed by those Yusufzi Pakthuns—a patrilineal descent group, who has control over land, a scarce resource in the area. Through the control of this scarce resource, a Pakthun leader attracts his clients and inflates his political ego. In a peasant village, Gobindpur (India), described by Nicholas (1965), the leadership role has always been assumed by the members of the Mashiya caste who holds more than 66% of the total land of the area. Caplan (1967) argues that the traditional leadership role

of the Limbus in Eastern Nepal collapsed when there were shifts in land policies over time carried out by the State. The political status of the Limbus was based on their rights over land.

This paper makes an attempt to analyse the role of changing leadership of a group, called Athpahariya Rais of Dhankuta District in Eastern Nepal. The discussion is centered on the powers assigned to the leader which allow him to control others in the group (Dewey 1975). Attempts are also made to show that though the structure of the larger national political system has changed over time, the traditional form of leadership and authority has remained safely intact and the "new" leaders are the same old people who held power in the former traditional systems. It is argued that wealth, extensive kinship network, and contacts with a bureaucracy were the important bases exploited to hold the traditional leadership, and that these bases are equally important even today. Finally, it is noted that the traditional political system and leadership may change in the future, if the existing local resources, particularly land ownership dwindles further. Furthermore, rapid population growth and outside contacts of people in the area may produce further variations in the political system and traditional leadership role of the Athpahariya Rais. To simplify arguments, the factors associated with changes in leadership in different periods are isolated and their relative importance in each period examined.

II. The Socio-Political Structure of the Athpahariyas

The Athpahariya Rais live in the Dhankuta District of Eastern Nepal. They are one of the groups of Rais, that number about 4,000 and with a distinct language and culture of their own. They marry exclusively within the group, and many people know one another either by marriage or descent. Most of the adults were illiterate in 1974 when I was in the field and their educational status was almost the same when I revisited the area in 1984. Before the opening of the Dharan-Dhankuta highway, they had little contact with people outside the small areas they inhabited. There was little specialization of work and seldom any machinery. The economy was based principally on agriculture, animal husbandry, petty trade and labour (Dahal 1985).

The Athpahariya Rais can be called a distinct political community; one observes among them a developed political structure and a complex and elaborate system of leadership. Following David Easton, a political community refers to:

...the aggregate of people who identify each other as a group and who are prepared to regulate their differences by means of a decision accepted as binding because they are made in accordance with shared political norms and structures (1959:229).

When the socio-historical situations of Athpahariyas are analysed, their socio-political organizations are found to have been centred upon three periods with different patterns of leadership. In each period, they identified themselves as a group, recognized a common territory of their own and shared the political norms and structures as binding with each other. The first may be called the "independent period", the period before they were merged into Nepal in 1774. During this period, they claim, they had their own territory and the socio-political structure was organized through a kinship network and a Chief *Chilinge Subba*. This Chief had defined territorial, judicial and administrative functions. The second may be called the post-unification period, (after 1774), when they were a part of the Nepalese kingdom, but were ruled by two different chiefs: the *Chilinge Subba* of their own and a *Subba* appointed by the government of Nepal. The third may be demarcated as the post-1962 panchayat period, when they were fully integrated into the central polity, but emulated their power and prestige as "leaders" within the panchayat framework.

In considering resources, land is the principal form of wealth, and it has played a key role to keep the Athpahariyas' socio-political structure institutionalized. The pattern of land holding which existed traditionally among the Athpahariyas was the *Kipat* system. *Kipat* itself carries a political meaning, indicating an ethnic group occupying a particular territory for a long time. When the small petty kingdoms were merged into Nepal by King Prithvinarayan Shah in 1768, *Kipat* holdings were subsequently renewed by him and other Shah rulers till 1968, when it was finally abolished. An Athpahariya Rai obtained rights of ownership to *Kipat* land by virtue of his membership to a clan group, especially in the localized clan group. Each clan group, consisting of 12 clans in all, had occupied its own separate *Kipat* land. Historically, land was distributed by the Athpahariyas themselves according to the total members in a particular clan. Because population growth was slow, and there was little contact with the outside community, *Kipat* land was not a scarce resource and was not a prominent cause of social conflict among the Athpahariyas two to three decades ago. *Kipat* was a corporate resource; it was also one of the foundations of wealth as well as power, and it symbolized a physical expression of a political unit to the Athpahariyas. Over time, the *Kipat* holding gradually declined because of the increase in population and also because the area was intruded upon by many migrant Hindu caste communities. In spite of this, Athpahariyas maintained themselves as a distinct political community, having their own leaders in every transitional period.

III. Leadership Among the Athpahariya Rais: The Post-Unification Period

As there is little written information available for the construction of leadership in the "independent period", this paper primarily focuses on the form of leadership that existed among the Athpahariyas in the post-unification period.

Since 1774 to 1962, a duality of leadership and two bases of authority constantly operated in the power structure of the Athpahariyas. Both these bases of leadership are commonly referred to as *Subba* (chief, headman) in local terminology. One of the *Subbas* was the "traditional *Subba*" (Village Headman) approved by the Athpahariya society whereas the other *Subba* was one appointed by the government of Nepal. Each *Subba* had clearly defined territorial, judicial and administrative functions. Both can be considered to be formal leaders in the context of the Athpahariyas.

The traditional *Subba* belonged to the member of the Chilinge clan. How the people of the Chilinge clan assumed leadership is not known among the Athpahariyas themselves. All male members of the Chilinge clan were known as *Subbas*, but the leadership role and power was always vested in the senior adult male of the clan. In the absence of the senior adult male, the role was exercised by his nominee who was always a male member of the Chilinge clan. The post of a traditional *Subba* was always inherited from the father by the eldest son.

The traditional *Subba* played a major role in the socio-religious life of the Athpahariyas. He was indispensable for carrying out ritual activities or purificatory ceremonies. He had the power to induct non-Athpahariyas (from those caste members from whom water can be accepted) into the fold and could also give a new clan name to this inducted member. Further, in every ritual and religious activity the *Subba* had to witness the function and accordingly had to announce his presence and thus validate it. At the time of a big festival e.g. *Mansire*, the first drum dance and song sequence had to begin with and from the house of this *Subba*. His position as a leader basically depended on his ritual status. His popularity was associated with the wealth, harmony and prosperity of the population and the lack of these positive elements was conceived to be due to the *Subba's* ritual failure. There was no overlap of interests or conflict between the leader and the follower, because the goal of the group was consolidated with the ritual purity of the *Subba*. The power hierarchy, however, was almost vertical. Few questioned his ritual superiority as they were morally obliged to follow him and there were not outside threats against his position as *Subba*. Briefly, the role of the traditional *Subba* among the Athpahariyas suggests that:

- (i) Authority is achieved rather than ascribed. A person becomes leader in a ranked system of society which demands no skills, knowledge or wealth for achieving the position;
- (ii) Power or authority is culturally sanctioned; if politics is defined as the struggle for power, there is no struggle for achieving the position and it is the *Subba* who prescribes the culturally accepted roles for the people.
- (iii) The traditional *Subba* is paid in every ceremony/ritual as his customary royalty. So the *Subba* and members of his family always held a better socio-economic position within the society.

The "other" *Subba* was appointed directly by the government of Nepal. A *Kipat* holder converting 60 *muris* of *Kipat khet* land (one *muri* of land occupies an area of 1,369 square feet) into *raikar* and paying a fee of fifty two rupees to the government, was conferred the position of a *Subba* (See Regmi: 1963). Only a Rai or a Limbu could become a *Subba* since only they had *Kipat* at their disposal. Thus, any person who was rich enough to deposit the sum as stated above could become a *Subba* and along with the title, a *Subba* was also given the *nisan* (sword) *nagara* (drum) and a *lalmohar* (royal decree) in his name.

Once the *Subba* was appointed, he would remain in the post until his death. If he was unable to perform his duties or if he misappropriated the land revenue or other local taxes which he had to collect for the government, the government would collect the sum from his personal property and dismiss him from service. His *nisan* and *nagara*, the symbols of his office, would also be confiscated.

This *Subba* was, in fact, the representative of the state among the Athpahariyas and the main channel of state control within the territory. He was responsible for keeping law and order and for slowly introducing Nepalese law into the community. He recruited the porters needed by the administration for the transport of essential food, animals and government properties and he was facilitated to do these jobs by *Pagaris* (there were a total of nine- *Pagaris* in the Athpaharyas' area) who were also appointed by the government. It was also customary among the Athpahariyas to supply free labour for five days from each family to compensate the *Subba* for his services. As *Subba*, he also had the right to exempt the land revenue of six households in his territory. Petty disputes were negotiated by the *Subba* himself and he could give a final decision regarding the matter. He also had the right to penalize the guilty person concerned in terms of cash or grain which he could utilize for himself. For his services in collecting the land revenue, the *Subba* received a

commission of five rupees on every hundred and five rupees collected on the Kipat land.

While performing his role as *Subba*, he was always assisted by nine *Pagaris* who were, in fact, the representatives of the nine different clans of the Athpahariyas. But only a rich Athpahariya of the particular clan, converting 30 *mato muri* of Kipat *khet* land into *raikar* and paying a fee of twenty six rupees to the government, was conferred the position of *Pagari*.

The available document from the Treasury Office in Dhankuta shows that the government appointed *Subbas* in the Athpahariyas' territory were Aiswar Singh Rai (1853-1893), Harkalal Rai (1893-1933) and Jarwar Singh Rai (1933-1951). They belonged to the Chilinge, Mangbung and Hombarak clans, respectively. Jarwar Singh Rai was discharged from his post because he misappropriated the land revenue and a Joshi (Newar) of Dhankuta bazaar had taken the official position of *Subba* in his name during the time this study was being carried out. In 1984 also, no Athpahariya Rai was working as *Subba* in the area.

The important question here is which of the two *Subbas* as a leader played a more crucial role in the Athpahariya society. In this context, the potential areas for conflict among the Athpahariyas have to be explored and also how social cohesion and stability are maintained within the group must be taken into account. Among the Athpahariyas, many of the conflicts occur on moral grounds, for example, marriage and death. Sexual crime is considered one of the most serious among the Athpahariyas outside marriage. If somebody breaks the rule, some misfortune like illness, was likely to occur against the guilty, or else a shaman diagnosed it as the cause of family trouble. The accused person had to accept punishment before the family and the village notables. Due to the shame of acknowledging one's own guilt before others, illicit sex was very uncommon. Similarly, there were social rules, (e.g. the violations of life cycle ceremonies/rituals), where one is obliged to pay the penalty to the traditional *Subba*. In general cultural sanctions brought to bear upon by means of popular folk-ways, laws and traditions which channeled behaviour towards the acceptable. In such a situation, the traditional *Subba* was honoured more. The group goal here is to maintain harmony and to keep up the socio-religious traditions.

The power and authority of the *Subba* appointed by the government depended to a great degree, on the loyalty to the King of Nepal. He was not involved with people directly as his role was less socially embedded than that of the traditional *Subba*. So outside certain assigned roles, the state appointed *Subba* did involve himself in the group goal as dictated by the traditional

Subba. However, one might say that the power of the state appointed *Subba* is still vertical but that it is no longer a patron-role which is the apex of the pyramid of power, such as that of the traditional *Subba*, but rather a broken role which mediates between top and bottom.

The Athpahariya case here offers an instance in which two types of leadership exist side by side but perform different functions. The traditional village leader has control over all the socio-religious activities, and the leader appointed by the government has control over minor law and order problems within the territory, collecting land taxes and playing the role of a mediator between the government and the people. The two leaders were never antagonistic towards one another regarding their identical roles and also did not produce two opposed groups, committed to different norms within the community. They rather prepared to regulate their differences by means of a common decision as binding and acceptable to all the members of Athpahariyas. Therefore, the institutionalization of the two opposed types of authority with their respective commitments did not result in institutional instability among the Athpahariyas.

IV. The Panchayat System

After the introduction of the Panchayat system as a new form of government in 1962, the Athpahariya territory was divided into four distinct village panchayats (administrative units)- Chuliban, Bazargaun, Nigale and Bhirgaun. Under this system, village leadership is elective and the designated leaders are - *Pradhan Pancha* (the head of village executive committee), *Upa Pradhan Pancha* (deputy head of village executive committee) and *Ward Chairman* (heads of each of the nine Wards of the village panchayat). Instead of one *Subba* and nine *Pagaris* in the whole territory as in the past, there is now one *Pradhan Pancha* and nine *Ward Chairman* in each of the four Athpahariya panchayats. But who are these *Pradhan Pancha*, *Upa Pradhan Pancha* and *ward chairmen* in the context of the Athpahariyas and how do they achieve these posts?

To answer the question, an extensive fieldwork was carried out in Chuliban Panchayat, one of the traditional habitats of the Athpahariyas in 1974. Seventy percent of the population of the Panchayat consisted of Athpahariyas. Eight of the eleven members of the village executive council were Athpahariyas. Of the eight Athpahariyas, six belonged to the same clan or lineage that held the post of *Subba/Pagari* in the past. The *Pradhan Pancha* and *Upa Pradhan Pancha* were members of the particular households of the *Lenguwa* and *Charingme* clans whose fathers and grandfathers were the *Pagaris* in their respective areas. Similarly, the *ward chairmen* belonged to *Hombarak*, *Mangbung*, and *Chilinge* clans whose forefathers held *Subba/Pagari* posts during the earlier post-unification period.

The Athpahariyas in the positions of leadership were fairly wealthy. The *Pradhan Pancha* had control over a large tract of good quality land (more than 100 *ropanis* registered under the ownership of various members of the family). Similarly, ward chairmen were economically better off for they, on the average, had more than 60 *ropanis* of land whereas the average family land holding among the Athpahariyas was only 42 *ropanis*. In other words, wealth played a vital role in becoming a *Subba* or *Pagari* in the past and is still a crucial factor in holding leadership within the panchayat system. It is not that a person pays voters to become a *Pradhan Pancha* or a ward chairman, for in an elective system, a potential leader can also attract followers when he has a large share of land and contact with the bureaucracy. This demands wealth also. The members of the old Chilinge *Subba*, the *Pagari* and the government appointed *Subba* who have had the largest land holdings in the village area, still maintain good contacts with the central bureaucracy and are thus able to retain their positions as leaders in their villages. In addition, social factors like blood ties, kinship etc. also play vital roles in leadership in the village. This was evident during elections for the post of *Pradhan Pancha* in Chuliban Panchayat in 1970 and 1974.

In 1970, a Newar resident of the same village panchayat with a large land holding, contested elections against an Athpahariya. However, the Newar candidate was badly defeated because, except for a few Athpahariyas, all the others supported the Athpahariya candidate. Here blood ties, marriage alliance, kinship role and the "ethnic sense" of a group played a significant role in defeating the Newar candidate. Another interesting election also took place for the post of *Pradhan Pancha* in this village panchayat in 1974 when two Athpahariyas both belonging to the *Subba* group contested for the same post.

One of the candidates, the incumbent *Pradhan Pancha* ran against a 74 old Athpahariya who was a ward chairman but one who had never become *Pradhan Pancha*. The old man was a retired army officer and a respected member of the community. He did not want to contest the elections but was forced into it by his nephew, an army man. The nephew who strongly disagreed with the policies of the incumbent *Pradhan Pancha* did not have the courage to challenge him personally in the election. So he pushed his uncle (father's elder brother) into the election. If his uncle won, he would naturally be in a position to manipulate the village panchayat politics. He therefore, saw himself as the "power behind the throne." He was supported by his clan members, a few obliged Athpahariyas and by some members of other caste groups. No doubt, the nephew was a factional leader in the village because of his wealth and oratory abilities and used all possible means to assure his uncle's position.

The other candidate who was supported by the Newars had a Newar as his *Upa Pradhan Pancha* candidate and all the Newars (who formed about 13 percent of the population of the panchayat) were motivated in supporting him. He was also supported by Athpahariyas, and by some other ethnic groups like the blacksmiths, cobblers etc. because they thought that this candidate would be less communal than the old man. The old man was badly beaten in the election receiving only 17 percent of the total votes. Similarly, the Newar candidate easily won the seat for *Upa Pradhan Pancha* not because he was popular among the Athpahariyas but because of his strategic alliances with the *Pradhan Pancha*, who had a large number of followers in the panchayat area.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this.

- (i) That in the new structure also, authority is achieved rather than fully ascribed. In addition to the extensive kinship network, wealth, the position of a person in a ranked system of society and contacts with a bureaucracy are still the essential inputs for a continuum of leadership. However, an aspirant for the post of *Pradhan Pancha* would have to be more politically active to achieve the post than in the case of a former traditional *Subba* (whether it is the Chillinge or the government appointed *Subba*). Furthermore, today, a successful leader is a person who stresses not only the group values but also seeks the cooperation and friendship from others. A leader must acknowledge and espouse the ideal of equivalence.
- (ii) There is a manifest tension within the group for changing leadership. This is because the areas of natural resources, particularly land, have become marginal and unevenly distributed. The population growth rate of more than two percent per annum over the past two decades² along with the intrusion of many migrant Hindu population in the area not only helped to increase outside contacts but also proportionately decreased the land holding of people, thus leading to a considerable tension within the community. Ethnicism has already developed among various groups and this tension is inevitably leading the community towards a process of social change; today, the people project out of one structure to another.

V. Conclusion

The Athpahariya Rais provide a clear example of the role of leadership gradually passing over to the same group of people even in a changing political situation. Similarly, the combination of wealth, the position of a person in a ranked system of society

with an extensive kin network, and contact with a bureaucracy resulted in producing successful leaders among the Athpahariyas at every period. However, one also notes that when authority is more decentralized in a changing political system, the leadership role demands more of a coalition politics—for elections as well as for holding the eleven member executive committee together. In the "Independent Period", the post of *Subba* was recognized and his power was a paron-type almost in the absolute sense. In the post-unification period, in addition to the traditional *Subba*, two other roles of leadership, *Subbas* and *Pagaris* were officially recognized and the concept of authority ran in two directions performing different roles and functions. The absolute power of the traditional *Subba* was lessened by these two new roles of leadership. Today in the Panchayat system, the *Subba* and *Pagari* in the village judiciary who have control over labour and resources no longer function directly. An elective process demands wealth as well as supporters. However, the new leadership was also subsumed by the same old people because of their wealth and position within the community.

In the traditional set-up, a close relationship existed between the political status and rights over land. However, over the years, beginning with the central government's introduction of new land policies, which slowly changed the *Kipat* land into *raikar*, there has been increasing state control, by the inclusion such as those evidenced by, *Subba* and *Pagari* in the Athpahariyas' territory. In 1968, the central government was successful in abolishing the *kipat* land rights. However, the Athpahariyas were able to hold onto the power structure amidst the sifting land policies and the changing political system. In the Athpahariya context, this has become possible because: (i) the area is still overwhelmingly inhabited by the Athpahariyas who retain considerable control over the traditional resource base i.e. land; (ii) kin structure is still the binding force of the country; and (iii) there is no collapse of the traditional leadership role of the Chilinge *Subba* who still holds the group together in socio-religious activities.

There is also a feeling that external threats to the traditional role of leadership among the Athpahariyas are emerging slowly. Some new leaders from other ethnic groups have already entered the panchayat system in the Athpahariya area and this has caused factions among the Athpahariyas themselves. The strategic alliance of a section of Athpahariyas with the Newars mentioned earlier, is a case in point. This is not to say that hostility is absent within the kinship network today. More conflicts are bound to occur within the group because of the process of ethnic interaction, and more so if the existing resources dwindle further. New inputs have come in from various

sources within the community. Furthermore, the extension of a motorable road over the years has widened the outlook of the Athpahariyas. In such circumstances, it is quite possible that the traditional and hereditary pattern of leadership among the Athpahariyas may drastically change in the near future.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork on the Athpahariya Rais on which this article is based, by the author was conducted from April 1974 to November 1974. The area was revisited in 1984. The article is the outcome of a larger research project on the Athpahariya Rais conducted under a grant from the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University. I am grateful to Dr. Chaitanya Mishra for his helpful comments on this paper.
2. It is estimated that the total population of the Athpahariya Rais was around 2500 in 1965. This estimation was based on the number of total Kipat households registered in the Treasury Office (Mal), Dhankuta.

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